

Welcome to another installment of the weekly Wahoo Central Podcast. I'm Jeff White from virginiasports.com, and we're coming to you today from our University Hall studio. The spring football festival is Saturday afternoon at Scott Stadium, and my guest today is UVAs quarterbacks coach Jason Beck. Jason, how are you doing?

Doing great. Really good to be on with you.

College teams are allowed 15 practices in the spring. You're 13 practices, and how much progress have you seen from your position group?

You know, we've come a long way. It's been great having Kurt as a returning starter. He's been getting a lot of the work this spring, and it's really been geared around his development both in terms of decision making processing. Those decisions, and putting everybody on the offense in the best position to be successful. It's also given us a chance to really develop De'Vante with what he can add to the offense and contribute to the team.

Kurt as you mentioned, has gotten the overwhelming majority of the snaps this spring. Would that be the case whenever you had a returning starter, or you trying to kind of accelerate his growth just because he was limited a little last year with his knee and being new to the system?

Usually the returning guy would get quite a bit of the work. With where we're at right now with our offense, he's getting a little more load than typical just because of really trying to develop him, as well as with the other grad transfer coming in in the fall, and Lindell coming in from high school. We don't have a lot of young guys that we're developing, and so we're able to give him a heavy load and develop De'Vante alongside it.

Coach Mendenhall has talked about the fact that the balance among the quarterbacks in terms of their classes is less than ideal right now. You have Kurt who's a graduate student or-- well, I guess he is a graduate student. He's going into his final year of eligibility. You have two redshirt freshmen, De'Vante Cross, Sonny Abramson. Then you got the two guys coming in. You mentioned Lindell Stone, who'll be a true freshman, and Marvin Zanders-- well, he'll have two years of eligibility left. What challenges does that kind of pose for you not having-- I know Bronco had said, he'd like to basically have one QB in every class.

Yeah, I mean just thin on depth. So it makes it hard to-- as far as bringing in the grad transfer, and getting them up to speed, competitive, able to know the offense to compete and then if needed play at a high level. And so you'd like to have more guys that have been here in the system developing so when that time is needed they're able to jump in and play. But it's the cards you're dealt, and so we really feel great about getting Marvin, two-year player. Gives us that depth, gives us that time to develop him, and now it's just getting him up to speed as quick as possible.

When does he actually arrive in Charlottesville? He's got to finish at Missouri.

Yeah, he'll graduate in May, and he'll be here early June and start that second summer term.

Is he worried-- I'm assuming he's been working on his own or trying to getting it out of the playbook, and doing whatever he can to familiarize himself with what awaits him here?

Yeah, we've been trying to get him film and things to study, to learn to get him up to speed. He has a pretty good load he's taken to be able to graduate early, and so it's just balancing that. Once he gets there in the summer then I'll really hit it full speed ahead.

You mentioned De'Vante Cross, and he's an intriguing athlete. How have you been kind of dividing up his reps? Coach Mendenhall was on a teleconference today with the ACC coaches, and he said, De'Vante see some work at wide receiver. I know there are packages for him at quarterback too. How do you envision using him?

Yeah, I mean, he's a good athlete. And so he's able to help our offense at other spots, and so we've been developing him to be able to play at those other spots and contribute to our offense. Just the idea of getting our best 22 guys on the field, and he is athletically one of those guys. And so with Kurt being in the spot he is, it gives De'Vante the opportunity to play at another spot instead of just sitting behind. And so developing him with some reps at QB, but also developing him as a skilled player to contribute to the team.

Would you like to ideally have dual-threat quarterbacks long term here? I think Coach Mendenhall has talked about that's something he'd like to have down the road at least.

Yeah, we would like to have a guy who is a real threat athletically to run the football, extend plays, make things happen with his legs, and so we want to recruit to that model. Knowing that we always want a guy that's a UVA person both academically but also as a person. But yeah, the more athletic, the better. Just the threat they can give to a defense.

Anyone who's seen Kurt this spring will note that he's noticeably thinner, fitter. He doesn't have the knee brace anymore. How different are things with him a year into the system? And when you look back at kind of what he went through, he graduates from college in three years, he's coming off ACL, he's getting married, he's moving to a new town. He had a lot of stuff thrown at him last year, didn't he?

Yeah, there was a pretty busy schedule for him, but he handled it really well. But coming off of the season there were some goals put in place to really get to kind of peak performance physically. And so like you commented, yeah, he's noticeably thinned down, 10, 12 pounds. And not that it's drastic in the way he's going to play, but it just

gives him a little quicker step. And so when needed, he can move in the pocket a little better, extend plays on the edges a little better. So yeah, with that better leaner body, he's just a little more explosive.

What did you think when you went back and assessed his play from last season? I've talked to him about it, and there were lots of good moments and there were a number of plays that he said he'd like to have back. How close was he to having a really, really good season?

Yeah, any young player is going to have those mistakes. That's part of the learning curve. In addition to that, he was battling an injury during part of the season that affects performance one way or another. And in addition to that, protected him as the season-- we've gotten to the meat of the ACC schedule. He was getting hit a little too often, and that kind of affected his performance. And so that's on us as coaches, and to put him in more positions to be successful, protect him better, keep him as healthy as possible so he can play at his best. But several bright spots on the air. Some low spots that really you learn and grow from and take those as challenging, difficult feedback and through that adversity he can really learn lessons that will help in his career.

He incurred the shoulder injury against Yukon, and played with it the rest of the year. I guess it was more severe than maybe he let on or the people outside the program knew. Did you think-- was there a stretch early in the season when you thought you might not have him because of that?

Yeah, I mean we were worried that he was always a play away. Another hit on that deal, that shoulder would be an issue. Yeah, we were worried that we were always a play away. Fortunately last year we had two guys, Matt who had started a lot of games here, and Connor who was a fifth year player, and so we were in a better position depth wise in case that happened. But yeah, and it's really that you're always one hit away, but when something is already wrong then obviously you're that much closer to that one hit away.

In 2016 Virginia ranked 115th nationally in scoring offense, 112th in total offense, 61st in passing offense. You were part of prolific offenses as a player and a coach at BYU. That was kind of a foreign experience for you, wasn't it? Going through something for you and the whole offensive staff. You were not accustomed to that.

Yeah, that was a challenging year, a difficult year. But everybody's digging in and working as hard as they can to make that, to improve, to build, and to be more efficient and more productive. It's going to be a long-term process to build that. We're not going to jump overnight to [INAUDIBLE] one of the top teams offensively in the country, because it's going to take getting more skill, more depth, better players all around. But as we build that through recruiting, we have to maximize execution and maximize opportunities. We have to be more efficient offensively.

Like several of your coaching colleagues here, you took an indirect route to BYU as a player. You grew up in Southern California. Were you recruited initially by BYU at all?

So no. Coming out of high school, I was not really recruited. I was a wing-T quarterback at a high school that's not real successful football wise, not real competitive. Out of high school I went on a two year mission.

To Denver right?

Yeah, to Denver, Colorado. After that mission, I went to a junior college to play football, and it was at a junior college that I was being recruited. I always grew up a big BYU fan, but did not think that would be an opportunity. Very few times have they recruited a junior college quarterback in their history, and so I was planning on just going other routes. And then just the way things worked out, BYU recruited me and offered me, and I felt very fortunate to go there to be able to play.

But you took a stop at College of the Canyons first, right? Coach Garrett Tujague was the offensive line coach then?

Yeah, he was the old line coach when I was there as a player, and so that was my first time really getting to meet him. And part of that BYU experience was tied into him and his relationship with the coaches there. And then as I got into coaching, I recruited that area. I recruited College of the Canyons, and so that's when I really got to know Garrett more on a-- not a coach player relationship but more on a friendship, and got to know him there. Then down the line we all ended up at BYU together. So it's kind of a small world.

Were you always going to go into coaching or at some point did you realize-- when did you realize that's what you wanted to do?

Yeah, it never really was on my radar for whatever reason. I always thought law school and something in attorney sports agent realm was on my-- that was my path. And I was actually in my final year of eligibility. I was graduating, and I just happened to do a pre-law class with an attorney coming in each week talking about what they did, and the more I listened the more I was not interested in going that route. And really hit me that football has always been my passion, but for whatever reason I just never thought of coaching at the college level. Never had registered. And one day it just really hit me like, oh, you could coach in college. Because at high school I didn't have an interest in teaching and coaching, so I had never really--

So you just wanted to coach?

Yeah, that really never fit, never registered, because I felt you really need a call to teach. My mom's a teacher, and I just didn't feel that way. And then one day it just really hit like, yeah, college coaching. That's what I want to do, and I was fortunate to get in. I was a graduate assistant and started on that path.

Yeah, so you did an internship and Coach Mendenhall was head coach then, right?

Correct.

Then you got to LSU for a year?

Correct, yeah.

What was that experience like? Les Miles was-- was Les the head coach then?

Yeah, Les Miles was the head coach. The offensive coordinator was Gary Crowton. He recruited me to BYU. He was the head coach when I went to BYU, and so that was my connection there. And it was just a great opportunity to see how a different program was run. How they did things. Became more familiar with the teams in that league and what that was like. So yeah, it was a great experience.

How much familiarity did you have with the state of Virginia if any, like coming here last year? Where's your comfort level in terms of recruiting, and just knowing the area and knowing the high school coaches and so forth, now as opposed to then?

We had played here to start up that season 2013. And really, I played at William and Mary once when I was coaching at Weber State. We played them in the playoffs, and I came here. That was really it. I hadn't been in the area recruiting, was really unfamiliar with the state of Virginia. So yeah, when I got here a year ago, very new experience. Meeting a lot of new coaches throughout the state, and so this spring starting the recruiting trail, yeah, felt light years ahead, as far as really knowing coaches in state, knowing the area, being familiar with everything.

What's your territory-- do you have a specific territory?

I have southwest Virginia. So kind of from Roanoke all the way down. And so this past Monday we were on the road hitting some of the top schools and players in state, so I was able to go back through. But love the southwest Virginia area. It's a lot of fun.

It's beautiful.

Yeah, beautiful. Especially springtime, hitting it. It's been wonderful.

So the BYU game at Scott Stadium, you're the quarterback coach. Now you can be honest. When Taysom Hill goes back and throws that pass, are you thinking as soon as he lets it go, oh-oh, the one that was intercepted late?

I thought it was a good read. He made the good decision. We had the back on the option route, and it just went right off his hands and right to a defender. And so until that point of that ball bounced off his hands, I kind of saw where it was going, and that was my first, oh-oh, moment.

And then there was a lateral on the return which doesn't always work out.

Right. It was just one of those at that time being on that side of it, if it was incomplete and you punt you feel good about your chances, but to have it go that way. Man that was a hard one for quite a while. That's never one you'll forget. Now it's unique, because now I'm, hey, kind on the other side of it. Now we won that game, but yeah, it's funny how that works out.

You've only been here for one year, but if there's been a common thread in the offenses problems even over the last decade, it's been turnovers and probably specifically interceptions more than fumbles. How much can a quarterback do, and how much can a coordinator and a quarterback's coach do to minimize the interceptions? Because if you look back at several of these seasons, it's not a stretch to say if the team did not turn the ball over as much, the record would have been a lot better.

Yeah, and that's generally across all of college football. The more most of your turnovers are interceptions, and most of those have big influence on the game.

Big things happen. We saw that against Wake.

Yeah, absolutely. That's a key. Part of that is experience. I think having a returning starter this year will provide some of that, and part of that's-- just it always comes down to the quarterback. He is that key decision maker. The better all 11 guys are on offense, the less of those problems there are. Because it piles up on that QB spot, both in terms of pressure and protection, and then in terms of skill, running routes, getting open, beating coverage. Those are all the things that we're trying to look at, address, put ourselves in the best position to protect the QB. The best position to get guys open, to be able to throw and catch the ball. And then ultimately there's those handful of plays a game where the quarterback has to make a great decision, because he's going to get pressured. Somebody is not going to be open. Somebody may do the wrong thing. This, that, the other comes down to the quarterback, and that moment making the right decision. And a lot of times a sack or a three and out is the best decision, because you can punt the ball and move on to the next series, and you don't have that big negative play that hurts your team. And so as we address that whole big picture issue, really comes down to a couple of those plays at the quarterback spot making the right decision in that pressure, which may be a sack or throw it out of bounds is the best decision.

Taquan Mizzell was a huge part of the passing game here during his career, and he's gone now. Hopefully will get

drafted this week. Is there another running back who is likely to figure that prominently in the passing game or will it be more wide out oriented probably?

It will be more by committee, both at the running back spot but other spots. Yeah, those 50 whatever catches he had last year will probably spread out amongst the other six players. He had a real unique dynamic skill set as a running back. That will be hard for anybody to step in and duplicate. We'll still use the running backs on the pass game, but we won't ask guys to fill in those same spots.

There's not a ton of depth at wide receiver. You do have guys who have had at the very least shown flashes during their careers. Andre Levrone, knock on wood, has been healthy this spring and seems to be playing the best football his career. What have your impressions been of the receivers in general? I know you don't work-- that's not your position group, but obviously you work closely with them.

Yeah, I mean Andre, he can have a big effect on our offense, because when he's healthy and playing well, he can really stretch the field and make big plays. And so he can really provide a spark to our offense. We return, oh, Olamide had 50 catches last year, and was a good playmaker, so we need to build on that. Doni has been out this spring, but he has another game with 50 catches and really provides a toughness with what he does, catching in tight windows, physical routes those things. So I need to continue to build on that. And then a couple of young guys, promising guys, with Joe Reed being able to use him. We've talked about De'Vante, being able to use him at some skilled spots to catch the ball. So really yeah, just need to replace obviously Smoke and Keeon who was another big player for this last year. So we've placed those guys as a team, as an offense with everybody contributing to that.

And I'll put you on the spot here. Your wife was an All-American soccer player, BYU. Who's the best athlete in the family?

She yes, she is definitely the best athlete in the family. We have got three little kids, and we're hoping they end up with mom's athleticism. I was a decent athlete, but obviously doesn't match up against her resume.

Well, I've seen the twins out here practicing. Look like they're off to a good start. They're pretty good on their feet.

Yeah, they love running around, and they definitely push each other. There's just built-in competition with two of them, and then their older sister. She'll definitely get the best out of them.

Well, I know you've got to get back to the McCue Center. I appreciate you coming by. We will see you on Saturday.

Sounds good, Jeff, thanks for being on.

Hope to see everybody at Scott Stadium on Saturday. They're calling for highs around 90, so bring your sunscreen. For information on football and all our other teams, check virginiasports.com. I'll be back next week with another Wahoo Central Podcast. Until then, thanks for listening.